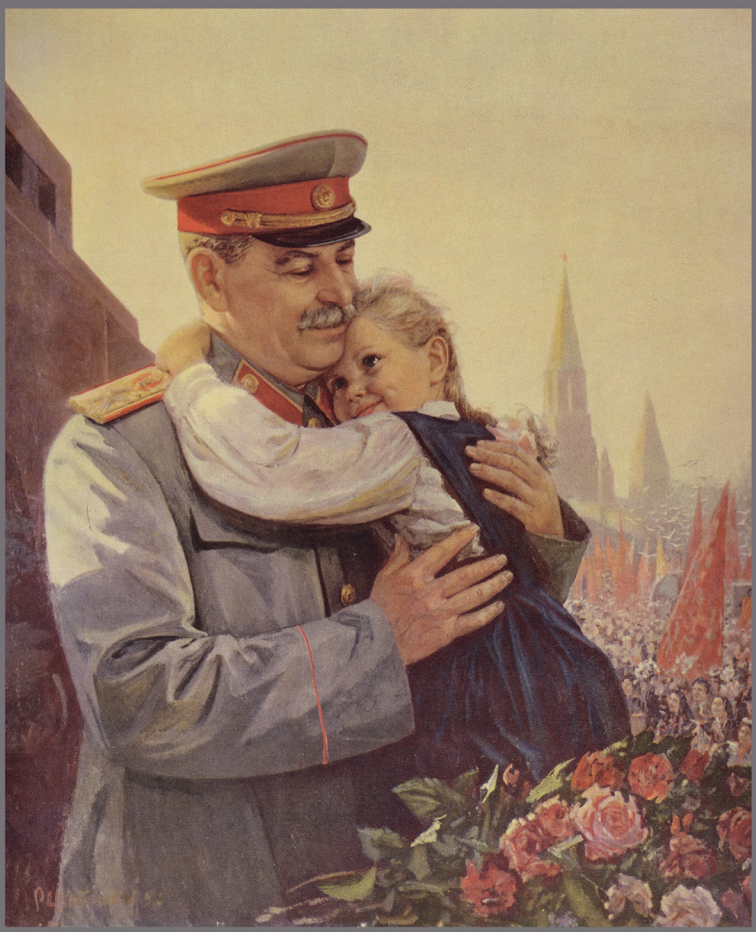
Revisioning Stalin and Stalinism

Complexities, Contradictions, and Controversies

Edited by James Ryan & Susan Grant



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For Geoff

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Notes on contributors

Balázs Apor teaches East European history in the Centre for European Studies as well as the Department of Russian and Slavonic Studies at Trinity College Dublin. His research interests include the study of propaganda and symbolic politics under Communist rule, and the Sovietization of Eastern Europe after the Second World War. He has a particular interest in the study of leader cults, the invention and dissemination of socialist myths and the functioning of rituals in Soviet-type societies. His most recent publications include a monograph, *The Invisible Shining: The Cult of Mátyás Rákosi in Stalinist Hungary, 1945–1956* (2017), and a co-edited volume, *The Handbook of COURAGE: Cultural Opposition and Its Heritage in Eastern Europe* (2018).

Chris Bellamy is Professor Emeritus of Maritime Security at the University of Greenwich, UK. A specialist in Russian and Soviet military studies, in 2018 he completed a visiting research fellowship on Russian hybrid warfare as part of the Changing Character of War Programme at the University of Oxford. He was the sole author or senior editor of ten major books, including *The Times Atlas of the Second World War* (1989) and *The Oxford Companion to Military Histor*y (2001). In 2007 he published *Absolute War: Soviet Russia in the Second World War*, which won the 2008 Westminster Medal for Military Literature.

Judith Devlin is a Professor Emerita in modern history in University College Dublin. She studied in Dublin, Paris and Oxford and worked for ten years in Ireland's Department of Foreign Affairs. She was seconded to study at the Ecole Nationale d'Administration in Paris, and served in the Irish embassy in Moscow during the Gorbachev reforms. Among her publications are: *The Superstitious Mind: French Peasants and the Supernatural in Nineteenth Century France* (1987); *The Rise of the Russian Democrats: The Causes and Consequences of the Elite Revolution* (1995); *Slavophiles and Commissars: Enemies of Democracy in Modern Russia* (1999); co-edited with Christoph Müller, *War of Words: Culture and the Mass Media in the Making of the Cold War in Europe* (2013); co-edited with John Paul Newman and Maria Falina, *World War I in Central and Eastern Europe* (2018). Her research focuses on Soviet and Russian political culture and in particular the Stalin cult.

Susan Grant is Reader in Modern European History at Liverpool John Moores University. Her research interests are in healthcare history and the social and cultural history of the Soviet Union. She is author of *Physical Culture and Sport in Soviet Society: Propaganda, Acculturation, and Transformation in the 1920s and 1930s* (2012) and editor of *Russian and Soviet Healthcare from an International Perspective: Comparing Professions, Practice and Gender, 1880–1960* (2017). She is preparing a book manuscript

on the history of Soviet nursing and currently holds a Wellcome Trust Investigator Award for a project on ageing and gerontology in the Soviet Union.

Caroline Kennedy-Pipe is Professor of International Security & International Relations at Loughborough University. Caroline works in the area of War Studies and has interests in the history of the Cold War, proxy wars and small wars. She is currently working on Arctic security issues as well as examining the legacies of war and conflict on individuals and communities. In this respect her work on IEDs and their impact on war and society is an important part of her research agenda. Caroline was visiting Fellow at the Rothermere Institute at the University of Oxford in 2018 and is currently a specialist adviser to the House of Commons Select Committee on Defence.

Daniel Kowalsky is Lecturer in European Studies at Queen's University, Belfast. He is the author of numerous books and articles on the civil war in Spain, including *La Unión Soviética y la guerra civil española* (2004), *Stalin and the Spanish Civil War* (2004). He was editor, between 2005 and 2010, of *British Documents on Foreign Affairs.* Series A: Russia/The Soviet Union. Part V, 1951–1956. His work has appeared in *Film History*, *Archivos de la Filmoteca, the Bulletin of Spanish Studies,* the *Journal of Slavic Military Studies,* and *Dictatorships and Democracies.*

Molly Pucci is an Assistant Professor of Twentieth Century European History at Trinity College Dublin. Her current book manuscript, which is published with Yale University Press, examines the creation of communist secret police institutions in Czechoslovakia, Poland and Eastern Germany in the period following the Second World War. Her research interests include the history of communism, legal history and the history of policing in twentieth-century Europe.

Christopher Read is Professor of European History at the University of Warwick. His recent books include *Stalin: From the Caucasus to the Kremlin* (2017); *War and Revolution in Russia 1914–22* (2014); *The Stalin Years: A Reader* (2004) and *Lenin: A Revolutionary Life* (2005). He is an editor and contributor to the *Russia's Great War and Revolution* international publishing project.

Geoffrey Roberts is Emeritus Professor of History at University College Cork. In 2018–19 he was EURIAS Senior Fellow at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. He has also received awards and fellowships from the universities of Harvard, Princeton and New York, the Kennan Institute, the Nobel Peace Institute and the Institute for Advanced Studies, Budapest. A specialist in Soviet foreign and military policy, his many books include *The Unholy Alliance: Stalin's Pact with Hitler* (1989), *The Soviet Union and the Origins of the Second World War* (1995), *The Soviet Union in World Politics, 1945–1991* (1999), *Victory at Stalingrad* (2003), *Stalin's Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939–1953* (2006), *Stalin's General: The Life of Georgy Zhukov* (2012), *Molotov: Stalin's Cold Warrior* (2012) and (with Martin Folly and Oleg Rzheshevsky) *Churchill and Stalin: Comrades-in-Arms during the Second World War*

(2019). His biography of Zhukov won the Society for Military History's Distinguished Book Award. His writings have been translated into more than 20 languages.

James Ryan is Senior Lecturer in Modern European (Russian) History at Cardiff University. His research interests focus on the interrelationship between political violence and ideology in inter-war Soviet Russia; intellectual history; and the politics of history and memory. He is the author of *Lenin's Terror: The Ideological Origins of Early Soviet State Violence* (2012), and he is currently writing an intellectual history of Soviet state violence, 1917–1941.

Peter Whitewood is Senior Lecturer in History at York St John University, UK. He is the author of *The Red Army and the Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Soviet Military* and editor (with Lara Douds and James Harris) of *The Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution: Illiberal Liberation, 1917–1941* (2020).

Acknowledgements

This volume has its origins in a special symposium of the Irish Association for Russian, Central and East European Studies to mark the retirement of Professor Geoffrey Roberts, held at University College Cork in May 2018. The papers seemed to cohere together particularly well, ideas flowed and bounced, and the thought of a book soon emerged.

There are good reasons to bring out a volume of essays on Stalin and Stalinism at the present time, as we outline in the Introduction below. But Geoff's retirement provided a very personal impetus, an occasion that deserved to be marked appropriately. For over thirty years he has been a prolific historian of the Soviet Union, especially its foreign policy during the Stalin era, and a biographer of some of its leading personages. A prominent commentator on Russian and diplomatic affairs, he is a foremost public intellectual in Ireland in particular, acknowledged in his election as a Member of the Royal Irish Academy in 2016.

Born in south London in 1952, Geoff earned his PhD in International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Very active in left-wing British politics, he transitioned to an academic career and moved to Ireland, taking up his first full-time teaching post in 1992 at the Department of History at University College Cork. He would remain in Cork for the remainder of his academic career, with periodic fellowships at Harvard, Princeton, the Nobel Peace Institute in Oslo, and the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, amongst others.

The subtitle of this book – 'complexities, contradictions and controversies' – reflects the nature of Stalinism, as we see it, but it also captures the significance of Geoff's voluminous body of published work. He has sought to convey the intricacies and paradoxes of his subjects and to renounce any simplistic rendering of historical themes. His conclusions have been carefully constructed (and, we suggest, convincing), but he has not shied away from controversy, as evidenced in particular by some of the reactions to his masterful *Stalin's Wars* (2006). He has also honed the art of combining prodigious and meticulous scholarship with effective communication to a wide audience. And as a teacher, Geoff impressed and inspired and convinced several generations of students, always generous with his time and his library. We are both fortunate enough to have known Geoff as a teacher, a mentor and a friend, and we dedicate this book to him.

At Bloomsbury, our editor, Rhodri Mogford, has been enthusiastic and encouraging from the outset. We thank him and Laura Reeves for their professionalism and attention to detail, but also their friendliness and adaptability. We are also grateful to We are also grateful to Mark Fisher for his meticulous copyediting, and to Susan Certo for her equally excellent index. And very importantly, we thank all the contributors for their diligence and extraordinary efficiency in meeting our deadlines! Finally, but certainly not least, we thank our wonderful families as well as our colleagues at Cardiff and Liverpool for their constant support, and our own students for their enthusiasm.

Note on transliteration

Transliterations from the Russian Cyrillic alphabet into Latin script follow the Library of Congress system, but with slightly simplified use of diacritical marks, and with the exception of certain names commonly anglicized, e.g. Trotsky rather than Trotskii, Moscow rather than Moskva.

Introduction: Revisioning Stalin and Stalinism

James Ryan and Susan Grant

In the early hours of 25 February 1956, Nikita Khrushchev, First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), delivered a four-hour speech to a closed session of the party's Twentieth Congress. Addressing delegates in a large hall inside the Grand Palace of the Moscow Kremlin, it was a defining moment in Khrushchev's career. In his speech, a report on the 'cult of personality', the First Secretary launched an impassioned and almost visceral attack on the reputation of his predecessor, Joseph Stalin, the acknowledged *vozhd'* (leader) of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) from 1929 until his death in 1953. The assault was pointedly personal. 'When we analyze the practice of *Stalin* in regard to the direction of the party and the country', Khrushchev remarked, and 'when we ponder over everything which *Stalin* perpetrated . . . the negative characteristics of *Stalin* . . . caused incalculable harm to our party' (emphases added).[1] The premise of Khrushchev's excoriating dismantlement of Stalin's rule was the latter's alleged departure from the example provided by Vladimir Lenin, the first leader of the party and Soviet state. Whereas Lenin, according to Khrushchev, had ruled with true authority, wisdom and modesty, through collective deliberation and consultation, Stalin displayed 'complete intolerance of collectivity in leadership'. His character was fundamentally flawed – 'capricious and despotic' – as a result of which he practised 'brutal violence' towards everyone and everything that opposed him or stood 'contrary to his concepts'. True, Khrushchev did not pin all wrongdoings on Stalin. But, he reasoned, Stalin's example and type of leadership 'encouraged and permitted' a more general arbitrariness in Soviet rule, 'many thousands' of arrests and deportations, and a climate of fear and insecurity.

Khrushchev took an enormous risk. By denouncing Stalin and the personality cult that had arisen around him, he had unavoidably called into question the very legitimacy of Soviet rule in the minds of party members, and, eventually, the Soviet populace. Stalin had come to personify Soviet power, its supposed benevolence, achievements and promises. He was, after all, the father-figure that had inspired Soviet victory over the terrifying Nazi war machine. Once leaked beyond the confines of the Kremlin, the consequences of the speech proved difficult to control. East of the imaginary 'iron curtain' that divided Cold War Europe, the Soviet-controlled Eastern Bloc witnessed its greatest strains since a popular rising in East Germany three years before. And

within the USSR itself, as Polly Jones has explained, the Soviet system was forced to accommodate an unprecedentedly complex narrative of 'guilt, shame, and trauma'.[2]

Khrushchev's speech was designed to foist upon Stalin ultimate responsibility for the transgressions of the Soviet regime during two-and-a-half decades of extraordinary upheaval and transformation, and thereby absolve the very structure of Soviet power and one-party dictatorship. The party would return to Leninist first principles, and all would be well. However, forceful and iconoclastic though Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin was, it was not unmitigated. Stalin had achieved much. He was praised for his role in defeating oppositional tendencies in the party in the 1920s. He was praised too for the policies of rapid industrialization and 'comprehensive collectivization' of agriculture in the early 1930s. In addition, Khrushchev did not reveal the true extent of Soviet mass violence in the late 1930s. In fact, for all the scorn heaped upon Stalin, just before stepping from the rostrum Khrushchev sounded a tragic note. Stalin, he suggested, was no mere despot. His errors had flowed from his conviction in what was necessary for the party, for the working people, and for 'the victory of socialism and communism'. In Khrushchev's view the 'true tragedy' (*istinnaia tragediia*) of Stalin was that he was a believer in communist transformation, but he had fallen from the path of Leninism. He had conflated the interests of world revolution with his own.

Ironically, Khrushchev's 'secret speech' is one of the most famous of the twentieth century, an extraordinary piece of rhetoric that has become a staple component of the scholarship and teaching of Soviet history. It has also helped shape that scholarship and teaching as well as wider understandings of Stalin's rule. Stalin's 'capricious and despotic character' is recognizable to most. The depiction of a tyrannical dictator has been reflected in scholarly and popular understandings that have frequently elided the man and the political 'system' that bears his name: Stalinism.[3] The speech also harmonizes with another highly influential narrative developed by Stalin's rival, Leon Trotsky, after the latter had been expelled from the USSR in 1929. Trotsky's condemnation was less personal and more systemic than Khrushchev's, but the message of both amounted to the October Revolution's having been 'betrayed' under Stalin's stewardship.[4] The implication – that Lenin and Leninism represented a purer form of revolutionary Marxism – possessed considerable appeal for many left-wing activists and scholars outside the USSR, although it is now divisive even for the political Left.[5]

Stalin is a towering figure of modern history, and his influence on the course of the twentieth century is difficult to quantify. As undisputed leader of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), renamed the CPSU in 1952, and ruler of the Soviet Union, he presided over the country's metamorphosis into an industrial superpower. The Stalinist regime was capable of withstanding invasion by Nazi Germany before conquering Berlin itself in 1945. It was under Stalin that the Eastern Bloc in Central and Eastern Europe was established, modelled on Stalinist rule in the USSR. The global Cold War geopolitical and cultural rivalries were also substantially formed with Stalin in the Kremlin, as the Soviet Union attained global influence and leadership through its alternative to American-led liberal capitalist democracy. And it was under Stalin that the Soviet Union became the most violent state in peacetime modern European history. Many millions of Soviet citizens and inhabitants were arrested, deported, executed, starved, or suffered from neglect as a direct or unintended

consequence of the actions of the Stalinist state, often at Stalin's command. Indeed the Stalinist 'revolution' in the Soviet Union in the 1930s provides a prime example of 'developmental violence': state-led transformation of a relatively underdeveloped economy and society into a modern industrial country, rapidly, and at enormous cost in human lives.[6] But the 'Stalin question', as Khrushchev pointed out in the often-overlooked passage at the end of his speech, is 'complicated'.

* * *

Revisioning Stalin and Stalinism introduces and intervenes in thematic controversies that characterize the political and cultural-political history of the Stalin period. Our explicit claim to 'revision' Stalin and Stalinism might seem entirely meaningless, perhaps even irritating. All good historical scholarship revises or reconsiders what we understand about a topic of enquiry, and, besides, it has been several decades since there existed a broadly identifiable school of 'revisionism' in Soviet historical studies. Nonetheless, the title is purposeful. It underlines the continuing challenge to recognize and analyse the complex, multi-faceted, and often contradictory nature of Stalin, Stalinism, and Stalinist-style leadership, and their representations. Hence, the volume 'revisions' Stalin and Stalinism in the sense suggested by historian Geoffrey Roberts in his celebrated and controversial *Stalin's Wars* (2006): together, these essays depict 'many Stalins', including the 'despot and diplomat' and the 'rational bureaucrat and paranoid politician', as well as some of the wider complexities of the Stalinist political system.[7] Broadly speaking, three important areas of debate are examined, united by a focus on political leadership. These are controversies of Stalin's leadership role; reconsideration of Stalin, Stalinism and the Cold War; and new perspectives on the cult of personality. This introductory essay provides a brief overview of these topics and the wider trends in anglophone scholarship on Stalinism, in order to situate the volume within the literature.

Stalin's leadership role

Khrushchev was right: the 'Stalin question' is complicated. There were horrific consequences to Stalinism, yet Stalin and his party were convinced that they acted in the ultimate interests of the working people and socialist revolution, and hence for the protection and advancement of humanity as a whole. And, although Stalin and his comrades bear much responsibility for a Cold War that in places turned very hot indeed, they had sought collective security and continuation of alliances with Western powers after the Second World War.[8] More profoundly, what Khrushchev could not acknowledge or admit was that the paradoxes of Stalinist rule were the most graphic manifestations of a more general paradox that characterized the Soviet regime from its foundation. The lofty ideals of human emancipation from the hardships and exploitation of capitalism and persistent warfare were funnelled, through a complex combination of ideological conviction, circumstance and recalcitrant reality, to create a dictatorial regime that parodied socialism more than it represented it.[9]

Complexity, however, is not an accurate description of how Stalin and Stalinism have conventionally been understood in most parts of the world. Stalin is usually found

keeping company with Adolf Hitler in the realm of reviled twentieth-century European dictators. But in Russia, the heartland of the former Soviet Union, things are somewhat different. Reputable opinion polls suggest that Stalin's popularity amongst Russians has grown over the past twenty years, and especially since Vladimir Putin's re-election as president in 2012. In fact, Stalin is one of the three most highly rated political leaders in Russia of the past hundred years.[10] Russians' attitudes toward Stalin and the Stalinist past are actually more intricate than bold statistics might suggest, but what is clear is that wartime triumph in the Great Patriotic War – as the Second World War is known in Russia – is of crucial significance. Putin's remarks at a meeting with young historians in November 2014 neatly summarize the conundrum that Russians (and not just Russians) face. 'It's just hard to say whether we could have won the war if the leaders [of the Soviet Union] had not been so cruel', Putin reasoned. 'And what would the consequences have been if we'd lost?' Putin himself was in no doubt: they would have been 'simply catastrophic', because the Nazis 'were going to physically exterminate the Slavic people'.[11] Baldly put, as Geoffrey Roberts has argued, Stalin's methods of rule 'were unpalatable but effective, and perhaps unavoidable if victory was to be secured'.[12] Whether or not one agrees with Putin, or with Roberts, Soviet wartime victory and Stalin's leadership are closely intertwined in the imagination of many Russians. Hitler's genocidal intent towards the Slavic peoples is not lost on a society for which victory in the war has become a core component of collective national identity. And alongside Soviet wartime victory, Stalin's cult of personality has played an important role in keeping Stalin, the man, front and centre in Soviet and Russian history.

Stalin, Stalinism and the Cold War

If the late 1940s and the early 1950s witnessed the omniprescence of Stalin's cult of personality at home, the leader himself was more visibly absent from Soviet public life. The science and culture wars of the age, as well as foreign policy, drew Stalin away from areas of domestic policy.[13] This was also a period characterized by great inconsistency in Soviet life, with policies of coercion and conservatism juxtaposed to hope and zeal in the social sphere.[14] The *Zhdanovshchina* – the post-war cultural restrictions and anti-Western orientation named for Andrei Zhdanov, the party's principal cultural theorist – accompanied by campaigns against 'rootless cosmopolitans' and anti-Semitism, saw Stalin re-emerge at his despotic worst in post-war domestic politics. A turn against the West and all things foreign was designed to reinforce the pre-eminence of socialism and, ipso facto, the Stalinist system. Abroad, Stalin the diplomat jousted with international leaders in power politics over Germany, Korea, Yugoslavia and the so-called people's democracies in Central and Eastern Europe. Apart from victory in the Great Patriotic War, the foremost legacy of Stalinism in global affairs was the Soviet Union's contribution to the Cold War.

Those post-war years may be thought of as 'the lost peace'.[15] A number of events set the scene for a prolonged period of political tension referred to as the Cold War: Churchill's speech in Fulton, Missouri on 5 March 1946 that famously imagined an 'iron curtain' descend on Europe; American President Harry Truman's 'Truman Doctrine' and the Marshall Plan for European aid; and Zhdanov's description in 1947

of a world divided by 'two camps'. The Soviet Union's ability to launch a nuclear war from 1949 – and turn the Cold War 'hot' – simultaneously elevated the status of the Soviet Union and international tensions. This development, and the creation of the Soviet-controlled Eastern Bloc in Europe along with the rise of communism in China in 1949, placed the Soviet Union in a position of geopolitical strength. As the world realigned into blocs and spheres of influence, and with the Soviet Union now a power player, Stalinism moved outside of Soviet borders. In its exported form, Stalinism was then reimagined or, one might even say, revisioned. Policies of Russification and socialist-style politics and culture made their way across the Eastern Bloc, to be applied in the creation of 'own brands' of Stalinism. This fusion of Stalinism and the former political systems in Central and Eastern Europe was further entangled by a complicated web of cross-border relationships.

Transnational activities were influential on a number of levels, and Soviet relations with the 'people's democracies' and countries further afield have helped to shape understandings not only of Soviet foreign policy, but also Stalinism itself. Michael David-Fox has written that 'border crossings had a crucial impact . . . throughout the history of Stalinism'.[16] This impact was felt in relations between the Soviet Union and both its Western and Eastern European neighbours, and is 'integral' to understanding Stalinist notions of communism as a 'superior civilization'.[17] The chapters in this volume, especially those that focus on finding new ways of understanding Stalinism in the Cold War period, show that the reshaping of the international order after the war rested on both domestic and international perceptions and interpretations of Stalinism.

The cult of personality

In theory, political leader cults are antithetical to Marxism's emphasis that socialist revolution is an affair of the working people as a whole. Nonetheless, Stalin's name and leadership style have become almost indelibly associated with the cult of personality. In his not-so-secret speech, Khrushchev heaped blame on the Stalin personality cult as the 'source . . . of exceedingly serious and grave perversions of Party principles'.[18] In contrast to Lenin, Khrushchev depicted Stalin as the architect of his own cult, curating the production of literature, film, monuments and art devoted to him. Even though the Stalin cult of personality began in 1929, the cult did not really take off until mid-1933, then took a 'hiatus' during the Second World War, before spiralling again in 1945 and 1949, the latter year seeing Stalin's seventieth birthday celebrated in the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc.[19]

During Stalin's time adulation for the *vozhd'* was portrayed, out of ideological conviction, as springing organically from the masses.[20] Conversely, Khrushchev separated Stalin and the system, rejecting the notion that the former's abuses of power were linked to the structures, practices and psychology of Bolshevik rule.[21] Questions about the *sui generis* nature of the Stalin cult naturally arise, but, as one scholar of Stalinism has recently surmised, in the context of the 1930s 'the Stalin Cult shouldn't be seen as intrinsically exceptional or above normal politics at all, and it certainly wasn't received as such by the population'.[22] The many layers of Stalinism, it seems, have yet to be peeled back fully to reveal how it functioned in practice.

These layers, the subject of much debate and controversy among scholars of the Soviet Union, persisted well past the death of Stalin himself. Although Khrushchev initiated a process of de-Stalinization after his secret speech, this had lost momentum by the 1960s and 1970s. After all, wartime victory, patriotism and superpower status referenced Late Stalinism.[23] The Brezhnev period reflected the celebratory politics of the late 1930s and 1940s, a suitable backdrop for the re-emergence of Stalinist elements. The Brezhnev years (1964–82) were marked by the 'cult of the Great Patriotic War' as opposed to the cult of Stalin, and Brezhnev himself lost no opportunity to build his own cult of personality by boasting about his own past military exploits.[24] But if Lenin and the revolution seemed inseparable in the minds of many Soviet citizens, then Stalin and the Second World War seemed equally inseparable (in spite of Khrushchev's best efforts). As we have seen, disentangling the two has proven difficult.

The meshing together of experiences, ideologies and representations formed a glue to bind Soviet citizens together, and later to connect Soviet and Eastern Bloc citizens. When the Soviet Union ended, the system that Stalin built came unstuck, but some of the gluey residue remained. As countries in Central and Eastern Europe today attempt to shed their links to 'totalitarianism', leaders and communities have sought, with considerable difficulty, to remove the visible vestiges of their countries' connections to communism. This has often been a dramatic, slow and painful process. Power vacuums, political tensions and economic instability have opened up spaces for other cults of personality and despotism to thrive. Replacing one political culture with another is not easily done; the legacies of Stalinism often live on in unexpected guises and forms.

Interpreting Stalinism: Controversies and contestations

It is difficult to define Stalinism. Initially, it represented a 'Great Break' from the relative moderation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in the 1920s, with its toleration of a limited market economy and profession of a more gradual evolution towards socialism. The Stalin era in Soviet history (1929–53), however, witnessed considerable change and evolution in policy. Furthermore, important elements of the Stalinist 'system', such as a state-planned economy and one-party rule, had existed before 1929 or were firmly in place by then, and persisted until *perestroika* in the late 1980s.[25] Nonetheless, as a compound of multi-faceted and sometimes contradictory ideological tenets, policies, institutions, practices, ethos, values and more general cultural attributes, it should certainly include the following: commitment to achieving a fully socialist, then communist, society; a centralized state-command economy under a single-party regime; enormous though not continual use of mass coercion and violence in the process of rapid economic and social modernization, and social engineering; political repression, and a somewhat pathological suspicion of 'enemies' of the revolution; a 'propaganda state' characterized by the extraordinary importance of communicating with and mobilizing its citizenry in the service of revolutionary social transformation; heavy regulation of information from within and beyond the state's borders; a cult of

the leader and a tendency towards patriarchal rule; and a projection of superiority relative to the assumed decadence of the capitalist world.[26]

All of these themes have been explored in considerable detail. Indeed, the volume of available literature on the Stalin era (in various languages) is so daunting that it is comforting to read Oleg Khlevniuk's honest description of this ever-expanding body of work as 'impossibly vast'.[27] Why, then, would anyone want to add to it? It is true, as David Hoffmann has put it, that 'no problem looms larger' for historians of the Soviet Union than explaining Stalinism.[28] Yet the reader would be forgiven for supposing that there is little new – or substantially new – that remains to be contributed.

In fact, original and insightful work that challenges received wisdom, or that illuminates previously unexplored issues, continues to appear. These outputs result both from the availability of previously classified archives accessible only since the early 1990s, and new approaches, questions and methodologies. For example, Lynne Viola's book on individual perpetrators of Stalinist state violence in the 1930s sheds new light on those that populated the apparatus of the Soviet state and carried out its most distasteful work, a study made possible through recently accessible files in the archive of the Ukrainian security services.[29] Jonathan Waterlow draws on jokes and satire to illuminate how ordinary people lived under Stalinism.[30] Cynthia Ruder and Katherine Zubovich have utilized the archival trails generated by Stalinist construction projects, respectively the Moscow canal and the monumental skyscrapers of post-war Moscow, to examine the projection of socialism onto the built environment; Zubovich's work also illustrates the spatial dimensions of Late Stalinist social differentiation, as space was cleared for these new buildings in the city centre through population displacement.[31] And recent works by Sarah Cameron and Robert Kindler, in particular, foreground Kazakhstan (not just Ukraine) in understanding the terrible phenomenon of famine in the USSR in the early 1930s.[32]

It is noteworthy that today's early- and mid-career scholars typically have little or no recollection of the Cold War, or experience of the politically charged atmosphere that often characterized the work of older generations.[33] But whatever the context, important questions about Stalinism – along with public and scholarly interest in it – will remain, and hence the continued value of works that synthesize secondary literature as well as offer new interpretations. In addition, the recent centenary of the Russian Revolution has provided renewed impetus for studies that reflect on the significance and fate of the Revolution, and the origins of Stalinism.[34]

Schools of thought: Totalitarianism

There have been several significant paradigm shifts in post-war Soviet studies. For much of the Cold War, English-language studies of the Soviet Union were dominated by the 'totalitarian school' or 'totalitarian model'. 'Totalitarianism' entered the political lexicon in the early-mid 1920s, as Benito Mussolini and his Italian Fascists boasted about their power and control and appropriated for themselves a word initially coined by their critics.[35] By the late 1950s the term had become conventional for describing such polities as Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and the Stalinist USSR. Cold War rivalries between the supposedly free Western world and the 'totalitarian' East had taken shape by then, and

scholars – primarily in the United States – were, in effect, enlisted in that struggle. It was important to 'know the enemy', or at least to know it as well as anyone could in the circumstances of restricted access to the Soviet Union, its people and its archives. Within that politically charged climate of American academia, in particular, the understanding of the Soviet Union that emerged was of a powerful, all-encompassing state ruled by a single party that had come to dominate its society almost completely.[36] Central to this framework was the contention that the totalitarian state was, to a considerable extent, constructed under Lenin's rule and merely developed further by Stalin. Its power was maintained by a mixture of invasive propaganda and political repression, backed up by the ubiquitous and brutal political police. There was no room for dissension, at least not without terrible consequences. And, according to the logic of Cold War geopolitics, such a system posed an existential threat to the 'free' world.

In effect, the totalitarian model presented the actually existing Soviet regime as a reflection of the ruling party's own projections – powerful, united, in control – but with the values inverted, and without the assumed basis of genuine popular legitimacy. An early if slightly caricatured example is the study of Bolshevism by Nathan Leites, published the year of Stalin's death. Leites was a social scientist at the RAND corporation, an independent thinktank that explicitly served US security interests. What Leites sought to capture was the 'spirit of the Bolshevik elite', assuming that the latter provided an 'operational code' that could decode the workings of the state itself. Leites was explicit about his methodology: he examined statements of the party leadership without seriously attending to the 'complex of conditions' that might contextualize those statements and their development. This was ideology as *doctrine*, largely shorn of uncertainties and adaptations, largely stable in content and function. And even though Leites acknowledged that there were uncertainties, including significant differences between the statements of Lenin and Stalin, he hesitated little to pronounce the party an omnipotent 'monolith' with clear continuity from its inception to the Cold War.[37]

The totalitarian school, though, was neither homogenous nor static. Leites's 1953 book was not well received by other US-based scholars, for whom it was shallow in approach though not misconceived in its underlying premises.[38] Published the same year was Merle Fainsod's *How Russia is Ruled*, a classic study of Soviet totalitarianism that nonetheless illustrates the possibilities for adaptation within the rubric of the totalitarian model. Ten years after it first appeared, Fainsod issued a revised edition that accounted for what he termed a more 'enlightened' totalitarianism under Khrushchev, thereby undermining the suggestion that Soviet power was monolithic.[39] That elasticity in understanding totalitarianism, and willingness to emend one's work in light of both political changes in the USSR and new evidence, Fainsod shared with Hannah Arendt, a prolific and highly influential political philosopher who had immigrated to the United States after fleeing Nazi Germany. In fact, Arendt's classic study, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), reminds us that even during the Cold War a distinction could be made between 'totalitarianism' as an object of study – albeit the word itself suggested an interpretation of a particular type of political formation – and an identifiable totalitarian 'school' of thought that provided a model, broadly speaking, for such regimes. Arendt departed from that model in important respects. In her 1966 preface, she went further than Fainsod by referring to a 'process of detotalitarization'

in the USSR after Stalin's death. More significant perhaps was her characterization of NEP as an 'obvious alternative' to Stalinism; that would later become a feature of 'revisionism' in Soviet studies.[40]

What bound together all descriptions of totalitarian polities was the understanding that they were not merely dictatorial or authoritarian: they were more socially invasive and repressive, more 'total' in dominance. But from where or what did they arise? In the Soviet context the reasons were often attributed to an ideology that sought total transformation of society and complete state control of the economy, while preaching a message of class struggle. For some scholars, the burden of responsibility actually originated with the ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.[41] However, not all works in this vein were equally focused on ideology, and hence the nature and source of 'totalitarianism' was open to dispute. Some located the roots of Soviet totalitarianism in the peculiarities of autocratic Russian political culture, others still in the personalities and pathologies of Lenin and Stalin and their ruthless accumulation of power.[42]

Revisionism

The totalitarian school was in large measure a function of political scientists and political science models, with some of its leading exponents (such as Zbigniew Brzezinski and the historian Richard Pipes) even occupying powerful positions in the Cold War-era White House.[43] Until the mid-1970s, Western historians, due to the inaccessibility of sensitive archive material, tended not to venture into or beyond 1917 in Russian/Soviet history.[44] However, the 'totalitarian' approach was never entirely dominant in Soviet studies beyond the borders of the USSR, especially in British and Western European scholarship. Indeed, to read the Cold-war era works of those such as the British-based economic historian R.W. Davies is to belie any supposition that excellent, relatively non-politicized scholarship was not produced long before the archives opened wide their doors.[45] But as a paradigm, 'totalitarianism' was undermined in the 1970s and 1980s. The challenge came from a wave of young and immensely talented 'revisionists', mainly historians, for whom the postulates of the totalitarian model seemed methodologically flawed as well as politically distasteful. This was the era of the New Left and opposition to the Vietnam War. Revisionism had already appeared in American diplomatic history, challenging and reversing the 'orthodox' assertion that Soviet expansionism was primarily responsible for the Cold War.[46] Conservative American Sovietology was soon engaged in a bitter struggle for control of the narrative on the Soviet Union itself. Some of these young scholars benefitted from new opportunities for cultural exchange to spend significant time living and researching in the USSR, forging friendships and learning the ways of Soviet life first-hand.[47] Yet revisionists were no more united than totalitarians. For some, challenging and replacing the narrative was perhaps more important than it was for others, for whom the inherent value of open-minded scholarship was primary and axiomatic.[48] What united them was opposition to the idea that the Soviet regime was a crudely totalitarian, monolithic, inherently and primarily repressive political system.

There were several distinguishing revisionist strands. Most prominent were social historians led by Sheila Fitzpatrick, who moved from Britain (and before that Australia)

to the US in the early 1970s. Whereas the totalitarian paradigm largely assumed that what mattered was what happened at the apex of power, and that there was no significant space for social autonomy, historians such as Fitzpatrick saw evidence of something more complicated. As Fitzpatrick herself later reflected, the main thrust of revisionism was 'to show that Soviet society was something more than just a passive object of the regime's manipulation and mobilization'.[49] Furthermore, as Fitzpatrick again has acknowledged, the very topics of research chosen by historians on exchange in Moscow necessarily reflected that which granted them limited access to archive collections in the first place: if they approached the Soviet period at all, social history was much more ideologically acceptable than party politics, and violent purges were off limits.[50] Such limitations and 'bargaining' aside, revisionist social and political historians were able to document, to the ire of totalitarian scholars, that the Stalinist order had a social support basis. They demonstrated, for example, that the so-called Stalinist 'revolution from above' at the turn of the 1930s actually relied upon some popular initiative and mobilization 'from below'.[51] Whereas Arendt, in particular, had stressed the social foundations and popular support of totalitarian rule, she had explained these by reference to what she disparagingly labelled 'the masses' – identified by sheer volume of number, political 'indifference', and the atomization of individuals in societies where identifiable class structures had broken down – rather than by 'common interest' or any articulated 'goals'.[52] By contrast, revisionists such as Fitzpatrick located the foundations of a new Stalinist social order in such things as 'affirmative action' programmes of social mobility, which allowed ambitious workers and peasants to receive education and to staff the Soviet bureaucracy.[53] But the principal theme that animated revisionists was the question of popular support for radical socialist revolution in 1917: social and political historians including Ronald Grigor Suny, Stephen Smith, Diane Koenker, William Rosenberg and Alexander Rabinowitch exposed significant working-class support (and, hence, some degree of legitimacy) for the Bolshevik declaration of Soviet power in the first place.[54]

In addition to pathbreaking social history that asserted the existence of social agency vis-à-vis the state, revisionist research on aspects of elite political history further undermined tenets of the totalitarian thesis. First, it became abundantly clear that the Soviet Union was not ruled by a monolithic party. Khrushchev's reforms might have been clear evidence of that for Fainsod and Arendt, but Rabinowitch was able to delineate the indeterminacy of Bolsheviks tactics in 1917 itself, and scholars such as Stephen Cohen and Robert Daniels convincingly chronicled alternative and oppositionist trends within the party before and during Stalin's leadership.[55] However viable an alternative might have been, Stalinism, it seemed, was certainly not the only, 'irresistible' outcome of Leninism. Second, there was the significance of ideology itself. Whereas totalitarian scholars tended to over-determine its role and define it rather crudely as rigid doctrine, some (but not all) revisionists tended to downplay its import to the point of neglect. Greater emphasis was attributed to the circumstances and political and economic structures within which the state acted.[56] For example, the political scientist Graeme Gill suggested that a necessary component of the functioning of the Stalinist state was personal networks and patronage, what he described as the 'structure of supporters which Stalin was able to place throughout the system'.[57]

Furthermore, new research in the 1980s by historians including J. Arch Getty and Roberta Manning argued that the spiral of violence in the 1930s issued from a weak and chaotic power-structure, and conflict between the centre and peripheries, rather than from the intentions of party leaders enabled by an all-powerful state.[58] With the unveiling of new archival evidence, Getty has more recently suggested that the apogee of violence in 1937–8 was, to a considerable extent, a response of Stalin and the centre to pressures from provincial party leaders.[59]

Post-revisionism

Work written through identifiably 'totalitarian' and 'revisionist' frameworks continued to be published into the 1990s,[60] and some of their features are still discernible. But with the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, the political stakes lost their immediate relevance for Western historians. A new cohort of scholars relatively free from the ideological struggles of previous generations entered the newly opened former Soviet archives. They brought to their work not just new sources and a fresh outlook but also methodological innovation derived from the more general 'cultural turn' and 'linguistic turn' that had swept the humanities by the 1980s.[61] Emphasis shifted away from notions of structural determinism and the solidity of categories of social analysis such as 'class', thereby departing from the Marxist philosophy of 'historical materialism' that suggested that cultures are constructed upon particular, immanent forms of social organization, that 'being determines consciousness'. Rather, as we have come to realize, 'culture' itself plays a significant role in forming and shaping social structures – fluid and contingent and contestable – and our place within them.

The cultural and linguistic turns have ensured greater attentiveness to language and other symbols, discursive representations, and identity constructions that inform political and social realities and practices, as well as the question how to read 'texts' and the variety of things that can be considered 'texts'. Drawing on the influences of philosophers, cultural theorists, symbolic anthropologists and historians, such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu, Joan Wallach Scott, Judith Butler and Clifford Geertz, cultural historians or historians influenced by the cultural turn and poststructuralism have helped 'unpack' interplays of power and meaning, and how dominant narratives and representations are constructed and challenged.[62] Within the field of Soviet studies, cultural history had become dominant by the dawn of the new millennium. Political and social history were rendered relatively out of fashion – or at least political history focused largely on leading men and state institutions, and social history focused on structures and objective processes out of tune with the concerns of the cultural historian.[63] Since then, innovative new research has appeared on social groups identified beyond class categories, and on hitherto relatively unexplored themes around issues of identity, gender and sexuality.[64]

By the mid-1990s it had become possible to speak of 'post-revisionism' in the historiography of the Soviet Union. Like revisionism, this emerged after Western diplomatic historians had produced a post-revisionist 'synthesis' in the 1980s on the origins of the Cold War, more sympathetic to the argument that it resulted primarily from Soviet expansionism.[65] Post-revisionism as a general historiographical tendency

typically combines elements of 'orthodox' and 'revisionist' paradigms but in rather intricate ways, and in Soviet historical studies it has resulted in an altogether more rounded picture. It has posed more complex questions and advanced more complex answers. For example, it has helped move us beyond relatively simplistic issues of continuity and change in the inter-war period, foregrounding instead dynamic interactions, exchanges and adaptations of historical agents and cultural models in what Katerina Clark has termed the 'ecology' and 'ecosystem' of revolution, both across the 1917 divide and the Stalinist 'Great Break'. Stalinism, in other words, did not follow an 'unswerving line' from Leninism or pre-revolutionary Russian culture, but, equally, it needed to locate 'some prior ground for . . . authenticity'.[66] And one of the most welcome and decidedly necessary characteristics of post-revisionism in Soviet studies has been the 'return of ideology'.[67] In the mid-1990s the increasingly prominent young historians Igal Halfin and Jochen Hellbeck rather bluntly upbraided revisionism for having 'deideologized' the Soviet system.[68] Scholarship in the post-revisionist vein has uncovered and highlighted the unmistakable depth of Bolshevik ideological conviction, aided by archival revelations that what Bolsheviks said to each other behind closed doors retained the unmistakeable imprint of an ideological mentality. But it has also re-conceptualized the relationship between state and society through examination of ideology as discourse rather than just doctrine; that is, the ways in which ideology was transmitted, received contested, and creatively integrated in people's lives.[69]

Perhaps the critical work of post-revisionism was Stephen Kotkin's *Magnetic Mountain* (1995), a brilliant study of the industrial city of Magnitogorsk on the Ural river that explained Stalinism as a particular form of 'civilization'. Going beyond revisionist identification of a social basis of support for the regime, and spurred by the work of Foucault on subjectivities – the formation of a coherent sense of the individual self – Kotkin argued for a rather fundamental rethink of Stalinism. It was not and could not have been merely repressive; it also provided a positive message about socialism that the populace could believe in. The distinctiveness of Stalinism, according to Kotkin, 'lay not in the formation of a mammoth state by means of the destruction of society but in the creation, along with such a state, of a new society'. Stalinism, he continued, 'signified the advent of a specifically socialist civilization based on the rejection of capitalism'.[70] In addition, ordinary citizens learned to 'speak Bolshevik', to negotiate with official bureaucracy in their own interests by speaking through the terms and norms of Bolshevik discourse. This naturally raised the question of the extent to which ordinary people truly believed in the message of 'revolutionary truth' put forth by the party. Kotkin's answer was inconclusive, but he suggested that Bolshevik ideological categories formed at least an inescapable component of how Soviet citizens interpreted the world. They also provided 'something to strive for'.[71]

Kotkin's work helped inspire other scholars, mainly Hellbeck and Halfin, to develop further the formation of Soviet subjectivities. Yet, according to both Halfin and Hellbeck, Kotkin had inadvertently reinforced 'aspects of the state-society dichotomy' by presenting Soviet citizens as subjects *reacting* to the state and its discourses, conforming to them, working around them or resisting them.[72] For Halfin and Hellbeck, what was most impressive about newly available sources such as diaries and other ego-documents is the extent to which the Bolshevik ideal of individual self-